ART EXHIBITION CATALOGUES REPUBLISHED ON MICROFICHE

Published on microfiche by:

Chadwyck-Healey Ltd
45 South Street
Bishops Stortford
Herts CM23 3AG
England

Somerset House
417 Maitland Avenue
Teaneck
New Jersey 07666
USA

Date of publication and production of master: 1975

Series: Each title is given a seven-figure serial number placed in the top right hand corner of the microfiche title strip. This is an accession number. The first figure indicates the number of the list in which the title first appears: the first three-figure group signifies the gallery or museum; the second three-figure group the accession number for that title.

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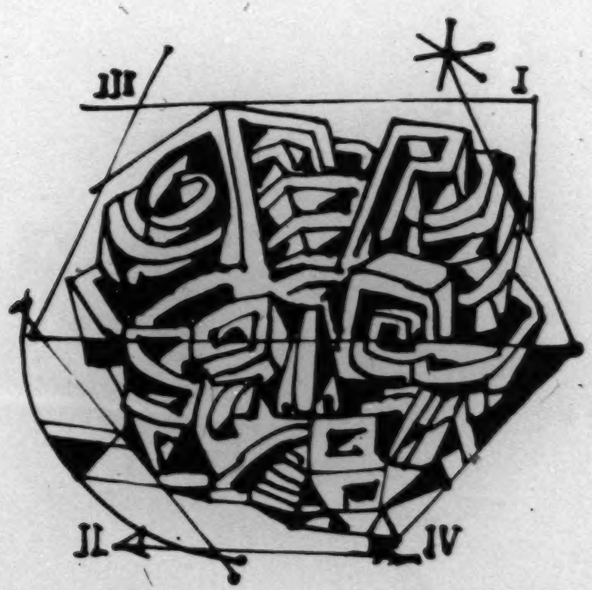
ANDRE MASSON



Cover: 17. Composition, 1943

Title page: André Masson. drypoint (detail), 1946

Back cover: 18. Composition, 1943

Exhibition 27

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ANDRE MASSON

Four Decades

NOVEMBER 28 to DECEMBER 23, 1972

BLUE MOON GALLERY
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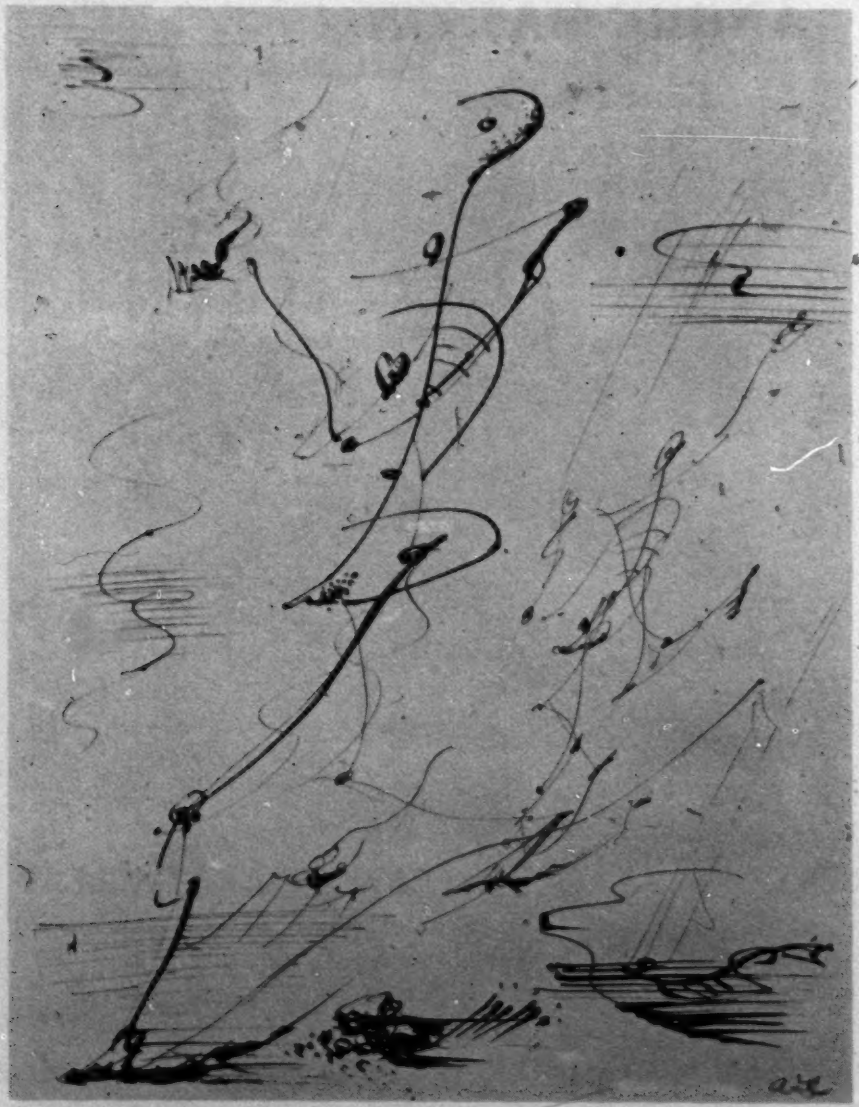
New York, N.Y. 10028
(212) 628-8673

LERNER-HELLER GALLERY
789 Madison Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10021
(212) 861-9010

Main exhibition at Lerner-Heller



3. Untitled, ink, 1927

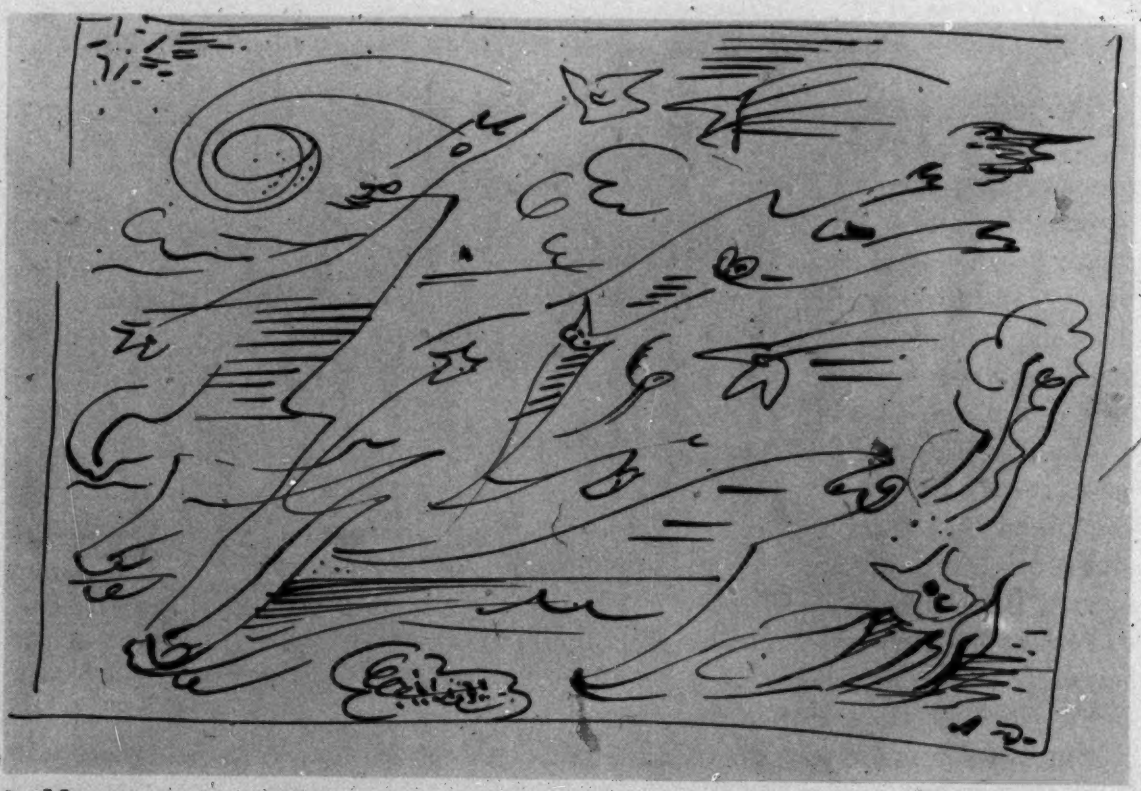
Notes on a study of André Masson

To enter into the realm of death and to emerge alive is an experience fabled in myth. André Masson, in the front line assault troops during World War I, recounts that the prospect of death was so overwhelming that to exist one had to consider one's self dead. Being in the state of the dead, one could regard death itself almost as an object. Consider therefore the skull of a dead soldier, broken and bloody, for its resemblance to a ripe pomegranate. Consider also the images and associations of this particular battlefield, repressed, synthesized, and commingled later within the ferment of a movement strong in psychic motivations known as Surrealism.

Masson emerged from the battlefield at the age of 22 gravely wounded. It was a return from the dead, a return from the labyrinth in which the young are sacrificed to a dark demigod. Perhaps it occurred to Masson then that the situations mythologized by the ancients maintain their validity in human events. But whether it occurred to him then in 1918 or provided the element of reality later when he and his friend Georges Bataille brought forth for the Surrealist consciousness the dark myth of the Minotaur, there is consistently in the work of Masson the undercurrent and the seizing upon of mortality.

But Masson is not a single-minded man, nor did such an influence dominate him. Possessing varied plastic talents as well as an inquiring and analytical mind, Masson has pursued an objective to which he is well suited—that of advancing his work rather than repeating it while nevertheless constantly synthesizing those psychic and intellectual perceptions that have always been at the core of the surrealist method.

In Masson's case, he became the master of the "automatic" drawing, the errant line, as Gertrude Stein termed it, which was drawn quickly and which succeeded both aesthetically and psychically. He developed the sand painting in which sand was used structurally, even symbolically, rather than just texturally. But beyond these technical innovations, significant as they were, Mas-



2. Mazeppa, ink, c. 1926

son was constantly dealing with a precise communicative element as well as with an aesthetic one. His first paintings seemed quite removed from the effects of his combat experience: quiet forests, still lifes, architecturally structured compositions with central figures often drawn automatically. But the movement that was in both Masson's hand and mind was contained just below the surface of these early paintings. The quiet forests look as if they are just ready to explode, the compositions with figures have elements swirling around the

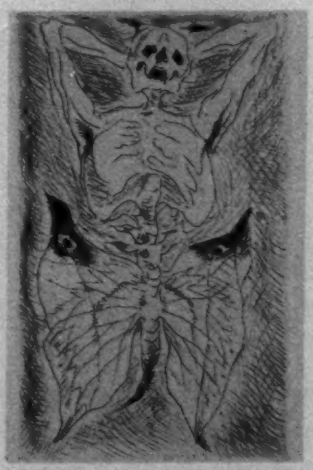
centers, and an occasional cemetery becomes the subject matter, or a man underground, apparently trapped.

Some of Masson's pictures of this period could be analyzed as cubist-oriented, but they are more comprehensible in surrealist terms. Blending content with style, Masson employed glasses as subject matter in a number of paintings, through which one saw dead fish or other still objects. Rather than looking *around* a subject in a cubist mode, Masson looked through to the subject. Or an automatically executed central motif would be imposed on cubist looking planes, which would serve as a quiet contrast to the focus of furious action. The pure expression of these ideas was found in the renowned automatic ink drawings of the period, which leave no doubt as to the originality of Masson's inventions.

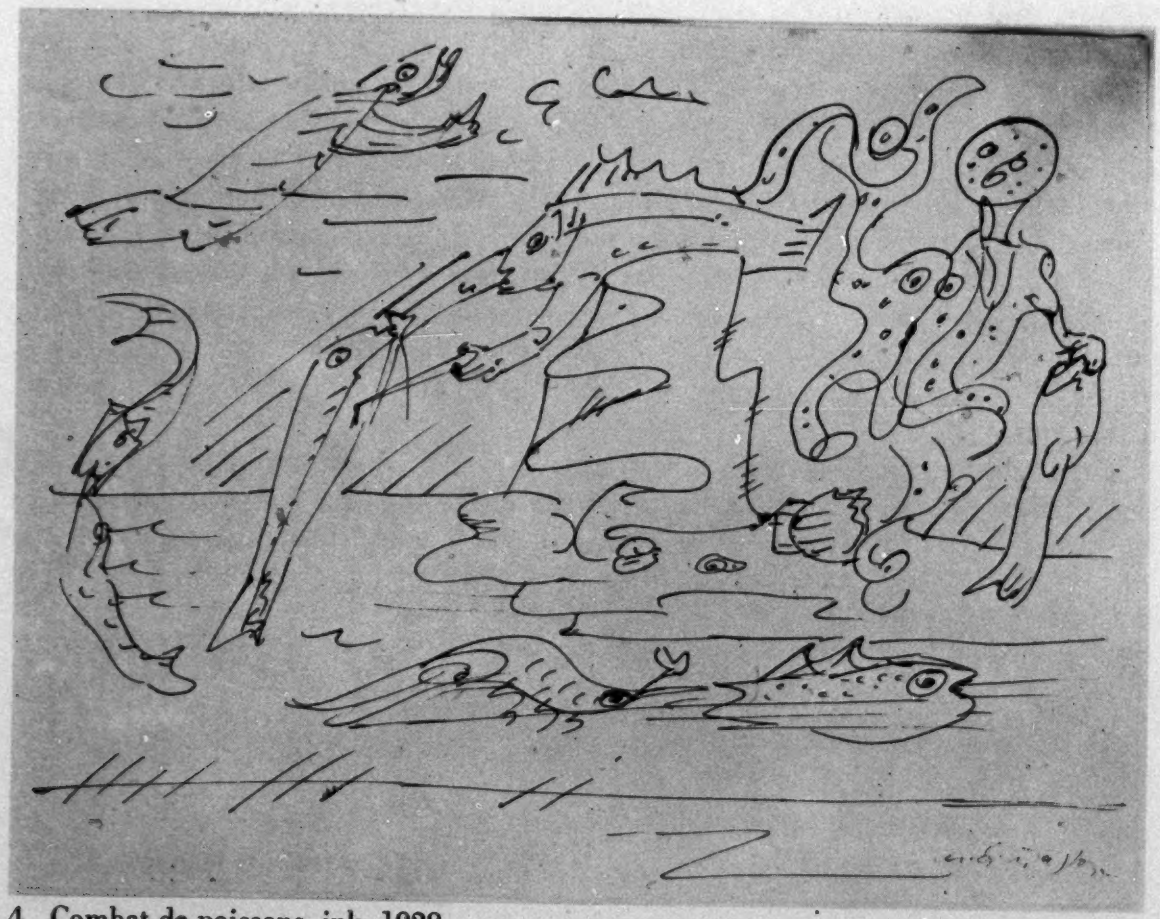
The turbulence of Masson's art so obvious in the automatic drawings continued muted in subsequent paintings of the 1920s. But the subjects of mortality—dead birds, birds caught in a trap, a dead man, dead horses, death's

Soleils bas, etching, 1924

L'anus solaire, drypoint, 1931



Les sans cou, etching, 1934



4. Combat de poissons, ink, 1928

heads—began to emerge in greater and greater plastic clarity until the battles of animals series made them explicit. Then battles of fishes, hunts, horses devouring birds, butcherings, animals devouring each other, birds battling fishes were subjects frequently developed by Masson until finally, with his climactic

6. La chasse, pastel on canvas, 1929

series of Massacres—drawings and paintings—the necessity of this mode of expression disappeared.

But the massacres, like the combats before them, were by no means purely literal. Masson's massacres were those of men stabbing women, injecting an erotic implication and investing them visually and psychologically with greater moment than the simple title implies. If indeed Masson had been struggling subconsciously with his terrible visions from the battlefield over a fifteen year period, the Massacres represent a considerable evolution not only of thought

7. Bacchanale, oil, 1934

but of plastic representation. The totally figurative depiction of a massacre usually conserves the automatic quality of Masson's earlier much more abstract drawings by a virtual orgy of figures, knives, breasts, legs, heads.

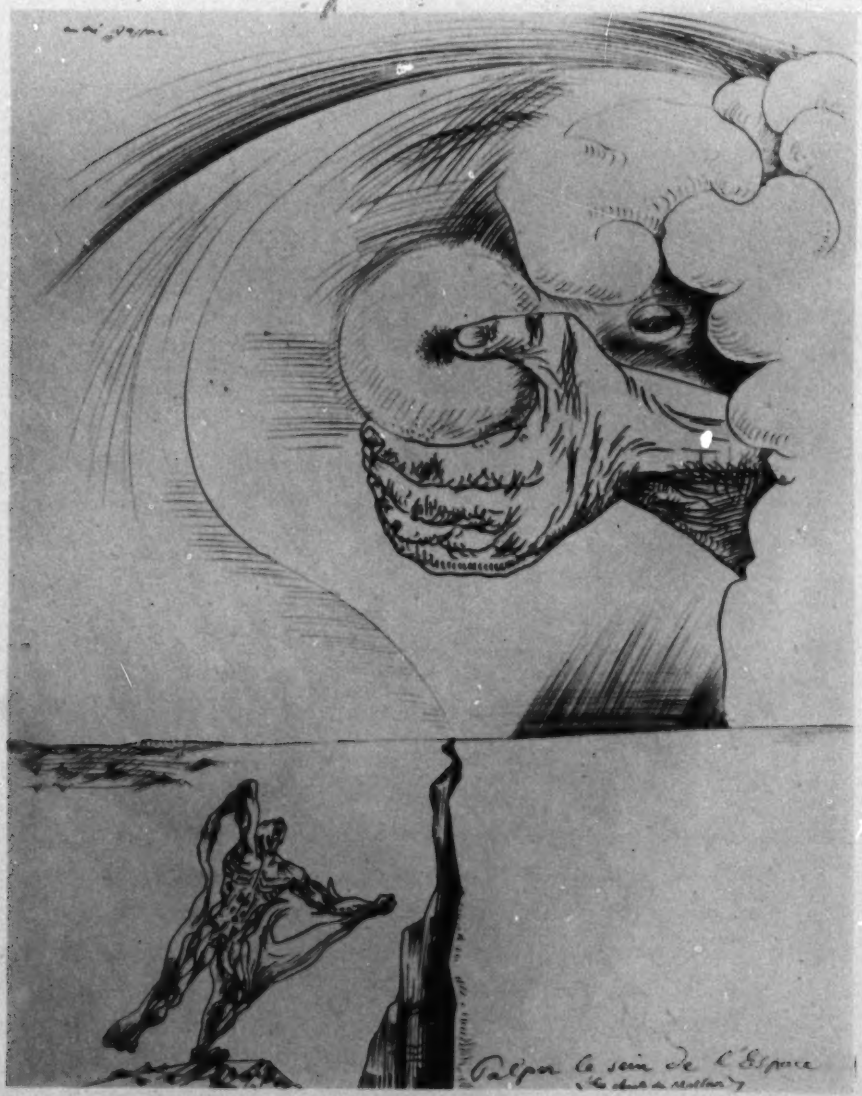
With the Massacres (and the related series, Sacrifices), whose erotic implications had been building for years in both his influences and in his other works, Masson reached a turning point in his life. As the massacres were ending, he transformed them into bacchanals—men with triangular bunches of grapes feeding them to reclining women. It was at this same time that Masson left France to live in Spain with his bride, and the quality of light in that

country burst into his paintings. Rather than combats of animals, he devised his brilliant series of corteges, balls, and diversions of insects—a surrealistic transformation of the bacchanals. Instead of massacres in fields under a golden sun, Masson saw the emaciated Spanish field hands as near skeletons—but not as death signs—under brilliant blue, red and yellow skies. The symbols of Spain, as well as its plants and animals, were incorporated surrealistically in Masson's work (Don Quixote and the Enchanters, Phantom of an Ass at Avila).

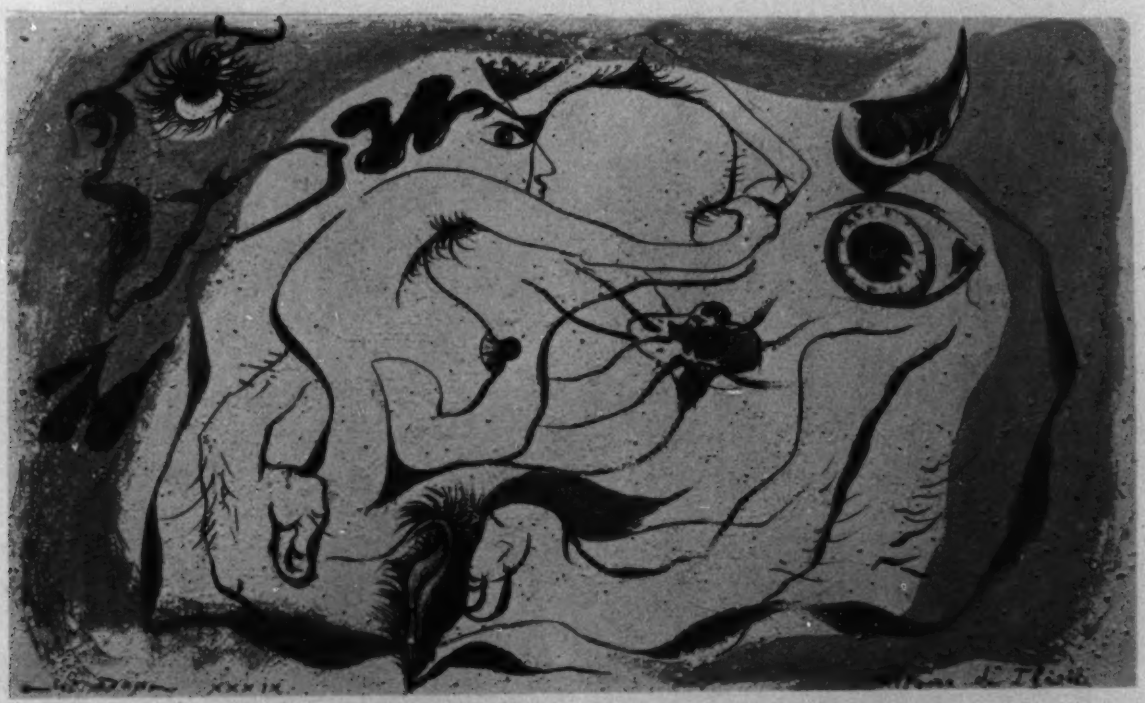
At the same time, Masson was working in a philosophical current that had started years before with Georges Bataille, the genesis of which was perhaps also that primordial battlefield in which Masson had found himself lost in 1918. The myth of the Minotaur (the product of the bull raping Pasiphaë) occupied the two men and had a profound effect on the surrealist group. Here was a "dark" myth that dealt with the complexities linking eroticism and mortality, ending much as it began with Theseus, the slayer of the Minotaur, raping Ariadne.

Massacre, etching, 1933

Minotaur, etching, 1933 (Sacrifices)

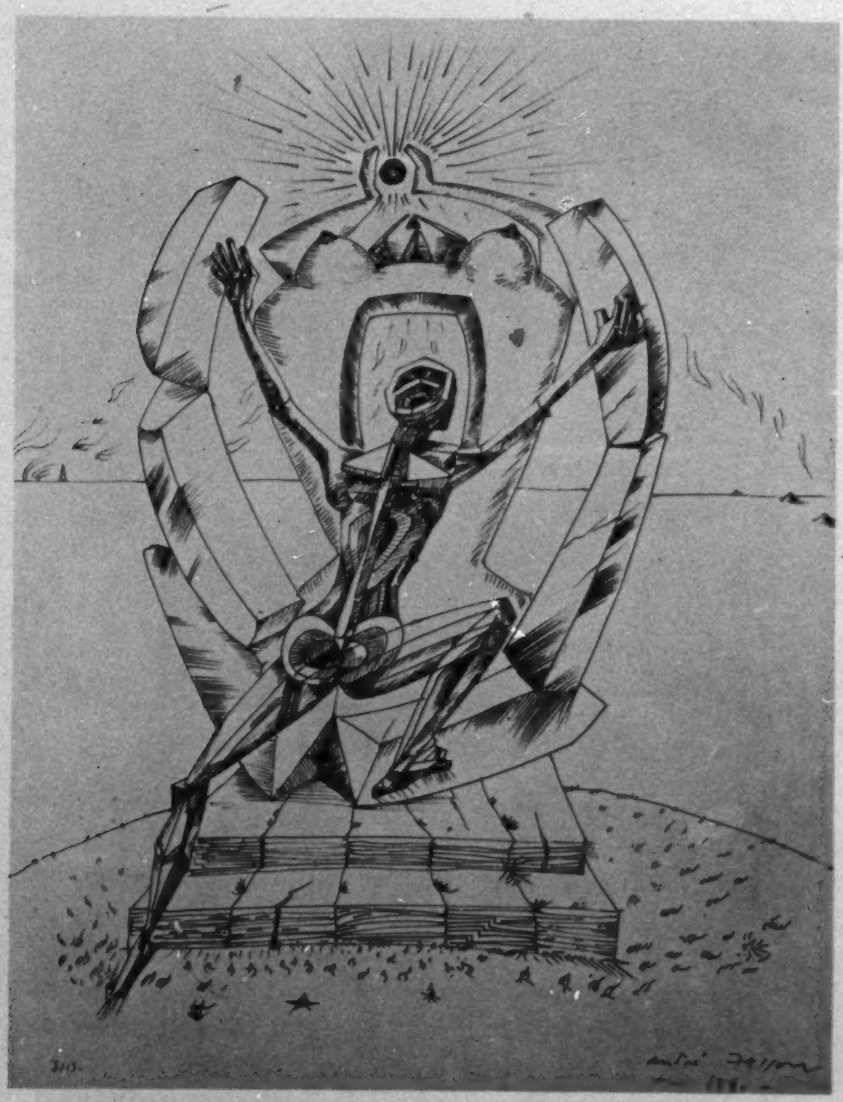


9. Palper le sein de l'espace (Les Chants de Maldoror), ink, 1937



10. Histoire de Thésée, oil and sand, 1939

Masson had been drawing erotically since the early twenties, and this certainly has been a strong component of his art, blending with the concept of metamorphosis which has always attracted him. As a sideline, a friend of his asked Masson to illustrate erotic books in 1928. The first was Le Con d'Irène by Louis Aragon and the second, L'Histoire de l'Oeil, for which Masson recruited a text by Bataille (written during his lunch hours at the Bibliothèque Nationale). The Minotaur research proceeded from this example of "dark" eroticism, but Masson only began grappling plastically with this problem in Spain. The association between the bullfight and the Minotaur was strong, but



14. Isis, ink, 1941,

Masson rarely mixed the two. Instead, he concentrated in 1936 on Pasiphaë. But the climax once more of the violently erotic and metamorphic was in Theseus' adventure in the labyrinth. Once Masson had depicted, in automatic terms, the penetration both of the labyrinth and of Ariadne, he was able to leave the Minotaur forever, just as he left the Massacres.*

In 1936, Masson's peace in Spain was shattered by the Spanish Civil War. He wrote at that time of a vision of destruction which he incorporated in his Anatomy of my Universe in 1943, and which inspired his great work reproduced in that book, Dream of a Future Desert (drawing: 1938; etching: 1942). While he made numerous drawings concerning the Spanish war and the grim etching for Eluard's lament for Spain, Solidarité (GLM, 1938), his painting did not reflect it directly, much as was the case early in his career concerning the first World War and, as it turned out, the second as well.

*In 1942 and 1943, Masson returned to Pasiphaë in his "American" style, but not to Theseus.

Rodéo, etching, 1943

Le crabe de terre, etching, 1943

19. L'arbre, ink, 1943

Instead, the late 1930s became a great period of synthesis in Masson's work. As he was completing the idea of the Minotaur, he began a higher plane of inquiry with his several series of drawings, Mythology of Nature, Mythology of Being and Anatomy of My Universe. These drawings explored the human condition with surrealist images, but their continuity was highly philosophical. The first drawing, recalling Pasiphaë, is a metamorphic landscape entitled, At the Source, the Loved Woman. The richly surrealistic paintings of this time mirror the direction of these drawings, incorporating the primacy of the female element even in the portrayal of the city, termed citadelle, or matriarcal landscape.

As his exposure to Spain altered his painting technique, so Masson's refuge during World War II in Martinique and Connecticut brought forth a reflection of the rich seasons of the Western hemisphere. To an artist in the maturity of his 40s, exploring the relation between man and nature, this particular physical placement was indeed fortuitous. Masson brought together his automatic

Baudelaire, etching, 1943

Femme attaquée par des oiseaux, drypoint, 1945

Ruines,litho, 1945

20. Contemplation de l'abîme, wash, 1943

impulses and his philosophical insights under a deep overlay of abstract, germinal color. The result was a profundity of both image and technique that reduced surrealistic symbolism to a fundamental core.

But the war impinged on his concentration in this research. By this time in his life, however, Masson could communicate succinctly about the holocaust engulfing the world. His Contemplation of the Abyss (wash, pastel and oil versions) in one deep stroke replaced years of combats. His feeling about humanity and the war was reflected particularly in his graphic works—the Genie of the Ruins, Oradour, the 2nd of May, and the human bestiary of twelve lithographs entitled Bestiare, which in Masson's mind linked the two world wars.

After returning to France, Masson recounts that he remained in a state of nervousness. Then in one day, he completed 20 large drawings (on the theme of desire) which brought him a catharsis perhaps built up from those days thirty years before on the battlefields and built up through the extraordinary syntheses he sustained in his work. As a result, he moved to the south of France

La peur, litho, 1945 (Bestiare)

Fantasie animale, drypoint, 1946

Penthésilée, drypoint, 1946

21. Jean-Louis Barrault dans Hamlet, wash, 1946

22. Branche de grenadier, oil, 1952

and embarked on a new approach to painting starting simply from nature. It is difficult for many to see how automatism and surrealism have been transformed in these paintings, and indeed often the attempt is plainly to explore light and natural forms as Turner and the Impressionists did. But the subconscious drives of the past were not gone. In the painting Pomegranate Branch, Masson technically takes the Impressionist colors and applies them automatically in a virtuoso performance, merging Impressionist perception of light with surrealist dynamism. At the same time a genie appears in the branch in a wild dance, and the red pomegranates recall to Masson that broken and bloody skull, apparition of the battlefield.

24. Tumulus I, sand and oil, 1957

Shortly thereafter, Masson was again freely inventing: flowerings, migrations, devourings, "feminaires" in the streets. One night at a performance of the Pekin opera in Paris, 1954, he sketched the dancers as calligraphic figures. Masson had developed a calligraphic line in America especially for his series of Trees in 1943. It was a natural outgrowth of the errant line of his automatic drawings. Suddenly, perhaps keyed by that night at the opera, he applied it to mass movement in his paintings—whether in migrations or the light of a season. He discovered an entirely new approach to that world of man and nature which he had constantly been exploring, more widely perhaps than any other of his contemporaries.

One could recount what Masson has produced in the past fifteen years, but he is so far ahead of us that we need more than that time to perceive what he has once more synthesized. He has always followed his own inventions and deep feelings to their logical endings over long periods of time. Ironically he has been accused by American critics contemporary with the Abstract Expressionists of copying those same artists whom he so profoundly influenced during

Voyage à Venise, color litho, 1952

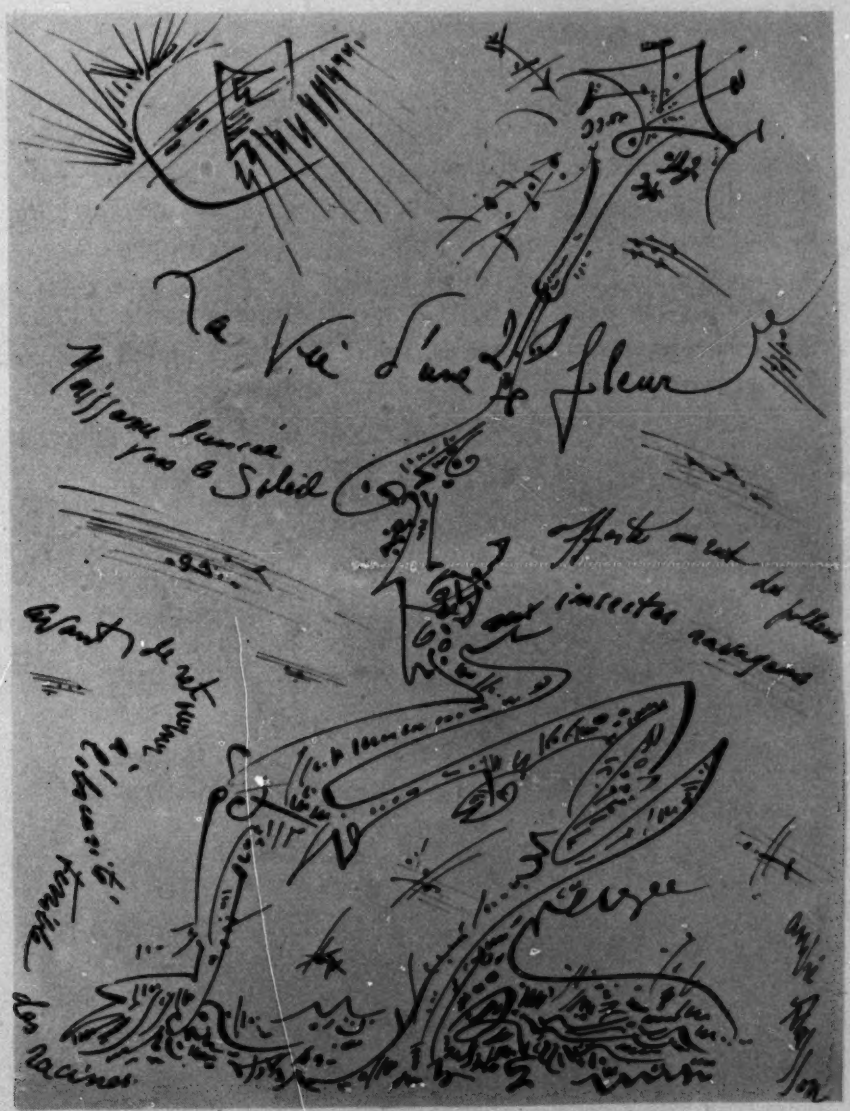
Acteurs chinois, etching, 1957

De Sade, etching, 1961

26. Migration aquatique, gouache, 1959

his stay in America. But the continuity and observable body of his work disprove this parochial view, and hopefully it will be a succeeding generation of American critics who will set it right. Meanwhile, André Masson, approaching his 77th birthday on January 4, goes as he has always gone: forward.

— L.M. SAPHIRE



25. La vie d'une fleur, ink, 1959,

CATALOGUE

Paintings and Drawings

1. Automatic drawing, ink, 1925, 12½x9¼", signed
2. *Mazeppa, ink, c. 1926, 9x11½", initialed
3. *Untitled, ink, 1927, 12½x9¼", signed
4. *Combat de poissons, ink, 1928, 12½x16¼", signed
5. Histoire de l'oeil, 2 pencil studies for lithographs (the mother; the orgy) illustrating the book by Lord Auch (Georges Bataille), 1928, 10⅞x8½" each, signed
6. *La chasse, pastel on canvas, 1929, 20x28¾", signed (priv. coll.)
7. *Bacchanale, oil, 1934, 13½x22¾", signed
8. Picador, pencil and pastel, 1936, 24½x18¾", signed
9. *Palper le sein de l'espace (Les Chants de Maldoror), ink, 1937, 25⅛x19⅞", signed, titled. Reproduced in Limbour/Masson Dessins, Braun, 1951 (Plate 8)
10. *Histoire de Thésée, oil and sand, 1939, 11¾x19⅝", signed, titled.
11. Paysage matriarcal, gouache, 1940, 15⅜x21½", signed (private coll.)
12. Le chiffre cinq, ink, 1940, 18¾x24½", signed. Reproduced in Masson/Anatomy of my Universe, Curt Valentin, 1943 (Plate III)
13. La Mulâtresse, ink and watercolor, 1940, 19½x18½", signed
14. *Isis, ink, 1941, 24⅞x19⅜", signed, titled
15. Hotel des automates, oil, 1941, 28¾x36¼". Reproduced in Breton/Le surréalisme et la peinture, Brentanos, 1945 (p. 64) and Clébert/Masson, Pierre Cailler, 1971 (#130). (private coll.)
16. Untitled, ink, 1942, 8x11", signed. Reproduced in Masson/Nocturnal Notebook, Curt Valentin, 1944 (Plate VII)
17. *Untitled, ink, c. 1942, 4¾x3⅝", signed. Reproduced in Masson/Anatomy of my Universe, Curt Valentin, 1943 (cover and colophon)
18. *Maquette cover for Anatomy of my Universe, ink, 1943, (two compositions, one developed into frontispiece of book), 9x7" each, signed
19. *L'arbre, ink, 1943, 22x14", signed
20. *Contemplation de l'abîme, wash, 1943, 19x15", signed. Reproduced in Clébert/Masson, Pierre Cailler, 1971 (#145)

21.*Jean-Louis Barrault dans Hamlet, wash, 1946, 12x9", initialed, titled.
22.*Branche de grenadier, oil, 1952, 17½x31½", signed
23. Féminaire de la Rue Saint-Denis II, oil, 1956, 20x6½", signed
24.*Tumulus I, sand and oil, 1957, 29½x29½", signed
25.*La vie d'une fleur, ink, 1959, 12¼x9½", signed, titled
26.*Migration aquatique, gouache, 1959, 19¾x25¾", signed, titled on reverse
27. Metamorphose, ink and wash, 1960, 12x9", signed
28.*Assassinat mythique, ink and watercolor, 1965, 12½x9⅝", signed, titled.

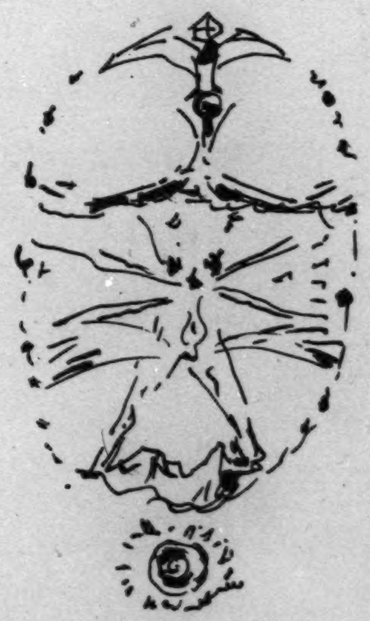
*Reproduced. Dimensions are height by width, in inches.

Graphics

The selection of original prints from 1924, when Masson taught himself etching to illustrate George Limbour's Soleils Bas, to 1972, over 800 works later, is not listed specifically. The Blue Moon Press will publish the complete catalogue of Masson's graphic work in four volumes. While Masson's output is voluminous (half of it in portfolios and books), small editions have made it exceedingly rare. His early work especially was frequently published in editions of only 10, 15 or 20 examples.

La dame du lac, etching, 1965

La fête de Pan, etching/aquatint, 1969



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